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ABSTRACT

Data on dropout trends over time are combined with data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey to give a picture of the dropout situation in the United States and the aspirations of students who have dropped out. In 1993, about 381,000 students dropped out of high school. In economic terms the consequences of dropping out can be demonstrated by the fact that, in 1992, dropouts earned about $6,000 a year less than those who completed high school. By all measures, the percentage of students dropping out of high school is declining. Even in large urban school districts, where dropout rates have been highest, they are improving. In 1992-93 the median 4-year dropout rate was 28%. Black and Hispanic American students are still somewhat more likely to drop out than Whites and Asian Americans. Thirty percent of girls who dropped out did so because of pregnancy. Many dropouts remain optimistic about their prospects. Only 15% of dropouts indicated that they expected to attain less than a high school education in their lifetimes, with about a fifth planning to attend a vocational or trade school. One third planned to attend college. (Contains 20 figures, 5 tables, and 10 references.) (SLD)

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ED 392 818

POLICY INFORMATION REPORT

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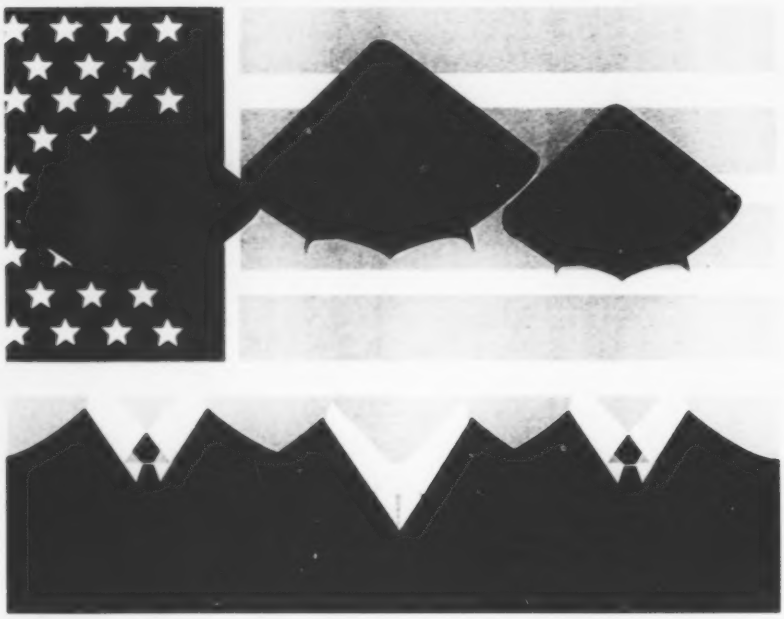
High School Dropouts in the United States



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This report was written by Richard J. Coley of the ETS Policy Information Center.

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Preface

Goal 2 of the National Education Goals states: "By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent." While there has been much progress in keeping students in school until graduation, this progress has slowed recently. Too many students still drop out of school, and the dropout rates in many of the nation's large cities are alarming. While concern about high dropout rates has been with us for decades, the consequences for youth and society have grown. Wages have both declined in real terms and fallen relative to those of high school graduates. With lower earning power, the risk of dependency rises. In this report Richard Coley has brought together data on the trends over time as well as new data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey to portray the situation that the nation and its youth face today.

Paul E. Barton
Director
Policy Information Center

Acknowledgments

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the U.S. Department of Education has been the primary source of information and data on high school dropouts through their regular publications, longitudinal studies, and data bases. NCES's ongoing efforts are critical to research in this area. Most of the data in this report comes from NCES. At Educational Testing Service, reviews of the report were provided by Paul Barton, Ruth Ekstrom, and Howard Wainer. At NCES, Peggy Quinn reviewed the report. Data analysis was provided by Karen Bricker at the National Data Resource Center. Albert Benderson was the editor and Carla Cooper provided desktop publishing services. Rod Rudder designed the cover. Errors of fact or interpretation are those of the author.

What happens to a
dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a
raisin in the sun? . . .
Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes
***Harlem* (1951)**

Highlights

According to national data:

- In 1993, about 381,000 students dropped out of high school. Over their lifetimes, they will earn hundreds of thousands of dollars less than their better educated peers.

- In 1992, dropouts earned an average of $12,809, about $6,000 less than high school graduates.

- Half the heads of households on welfare are dropouts, as are half of the people in jail.

- By all measures, the percentage of students dropping out of high school is declining. On some measures there are differences among racial ethnic groups; on other measures there are no significant differences.

- About 3 percent of those who drop out do so at or before the fourth grade, 20 percent drop out at or before the eighth grade, and 61 percent drop out at or before the tenth grade. Nearly 40 percent of the Hispanic dropouts have an eighth grade education or less.

According to state, city, and other sources:

- North Dakota has the lowest dropout rate among the states; Nevada has the highest.

- Dropout rates in the large, urban districts are high, but generally improving. In 1992-93, the median four-year dropout rate among large city school districts was 28 percent; the single year rate was 9 percent.

- Each year about 450,000 people get a high school credential by passing the Tests of General Educational Development (GED).

According to new data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988:

- Black and Hispanic students were somewhat more likely to drop out than White or Asian students.

- Half the dropouts left school before the eleventh grade.

- Almost 40 percent of the dropouts either had a child or were expecting one. This was the case for 54 percent of the females and 26 percent of the males. Only about one-quarter were married to and living with the other parent of their child. Another 18 percent were living with the parent of their child.

- 30 percent of girls who dropped out said they did so because they were pregnant.

- Dropouts were more likely than graduates to have changed schools, to have moved, and to have run away from home.

- Problems in school were a major reason for dropping out. Balancing work and school also seemed to play a significant role.

- Dropouts experienced considerable difficulty in school during the semester before they dropped out.

- Only 18 percent of the dropouts passed their last year of school.

- A large majority of dropouts were enrolled in the general high school program.

- One-quarter of the dropouts had participated in an alternative program in school.

- 8 percent of the dropouts have a GED or high school diploma and another 82 percent plan to get one.

- Most of the dropouts' jobs are in the labor service area.

- Dropouts are fairly optimistic for their children, their personal relationships, their health, and their jobs. They are less optimistic about their chances for further educational attainment.

- Dropouts tend to exhibit an external locus of control, i.e., they feel that they have little control over their lives. Most seem to have fairly high self-concept, however.

- Only 15 percent of the dropouts indicated that they expected to attain less than a high school education in their lifetime. About a fifth planned to attend vocational, trade, or business school, and almost a third expected to attend college, with 11 percent expecting to attain a degree. Five percent expected to obtain a master's degree.

From the beginning of the 20th century until about 1940, the typical American adult had an eighth grade education. By 1940, only 6 percent of males and 4 percent of females had completed four years of college. During the next two decades, however, things changed dramatically.

In the 1940s and 1950s, more than half the young adults completed high school, and the median education of 25-29-year-olds rose to 12.3 years. Although by 1960, approximately 40 percent of males, 25 years old and over, still had no more than an eighth grade education, 40 percent had completed high school and 10 percent had completed four years of college. The educational attainment of women was about the same, except that a smaller proportion of women completed college.

During the 1960s, there was a rise in the educational level of the U.S. population, particularly for Black adults. Between 1960 and 1970, the median years of school completed by Black males, 25 to 29 years old, rose from 10.5 to 12.2. Then, during the last 20 years, the educational attainment of young adults basically remained stable. The average educational attainment for the entire population continued to rise as the more highly educated younger cohorts replaced older Americans who had fewer educational opportunities.

Education, more and more, has become key to a productive and satisfying life. Gone are the days when a lack of education didn't hurt one's chances for finding good, steady work. Opportunities are expanding for those with higher level skills and abilities and withering for those without such skills. Yet many of our citizens are not acquiring the skills or training needed to participate in this changing workplace. In 1993, about 381,000 students dropped out of high school. According to the Census Bureau, over the course of their working lives, these individuals will:

- earn $212,000 less than high school graduates
- earn $384,000 less than persons having some college education
- earn $812,000 less than college graduates
- earn $2,404,000 less than individuals with professional degrees[2]

And the news gets worse. These estimates assume that 1992 wage differentials by level of education will remain the same in the future. However, those with more education have been gaining ground faster, and the differentials are widening to the disadvantage of school dropouts. Between 1975 and 1992, earnings:

- doubled for high school dropouts
- rose 2.5 times for high school graduates
- nearly tripled for holders of bachelor's degrees
- tripled for holders of advanced degrees

Figure 1 shows these relationships on an annual basis. In 1992, high school dropouts earned an average salary of only $12,809, about $6,000 less than high school graduates. The relationship seen in this graph between higher levels of education and income is strong.

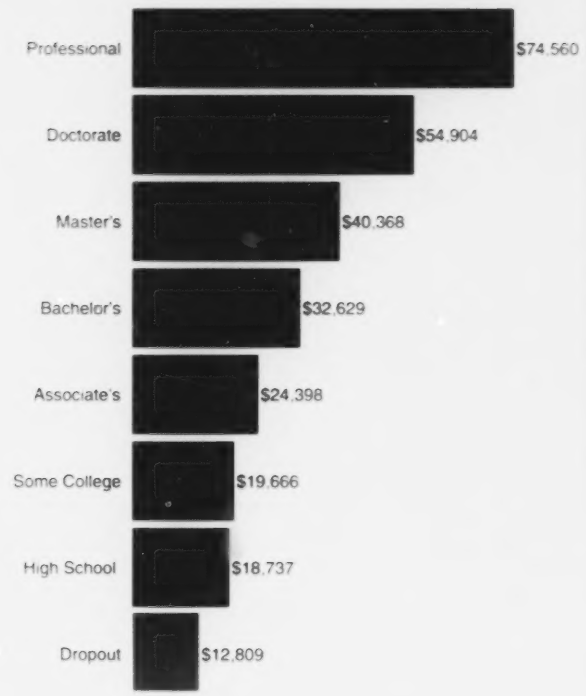
Dropouts have a profound impact on society. Nearly half of the heads of households on welfare failed to finish high school. And half of the U.S. prison population in 1992 were high school dropouts. Dropouts are disconnected from mainstream America, with little chance for a rewarding career and a life of self-fulfillment.

* * * *

This brief history of educational attainment was drawn from National Center for Education Statistics, *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, January 1993.

Bureau of the Census Statistical Brief, *More Education Means Higher Career Earnings*, SB/93-17, August 1993.

Figure 1: Earnings and Education - Average Annual Earnings for Persons Age 18 and Over, by Level of Education, 1992



Source: "More Education Means Higher Career Earnings," Bureau of the Census Statistical Brief, SB/94-17, August 1994

This report examines the dropout problem in the United States from a number of angles. The first section pulls together data that attempt to quantify the dropout problem in the United States. The section provides several indicators of the problem, offering the reader several statistics from which to make judgments. It provides data for the nation as a whole, for individual states, and for the nation's large urban school districts. It also provides data on the GED program.

The second section of the report focuses on the characteristics of high school dropouts. Using new data collected from the NELS:88 second follow-up, this section focuses on the differences between dropouts and other students, reasons for dropping out, and the experiences of dropouts.

SIZING UP THE PROBLEM: MEASURING THE DROPOUT RATE

Of all the measurements taken in education, calculating the dropout rate is probably the most problematic. Many different measures exist and are employed by different agencies, depending on a variety of factors. Schools and school districts keep dynamic data — students enroll, leave, graduate, transfer, and come back to school almost daily. Such data often do not possess the comparability necessary to evaluate and compare schools, districts, states, or even track the dropout rate from year to year. On the other hand, more static and standardized data often don't offer the flexibility individual schools need to characterize their students' behavior.

Basically, the dropout rate is composed of a numerator (the number of dropouts, however defined) and a denominator (the pool from which the dropouts originated). The data that we will be examining in this report have a fairly consistent numerator. Statistics gathered by the federal government generally consider a dropout as someone who is not currently enrolled in school and has not obtained a credential (either a diploma or a GED certificate). Denominators, on the other hand, vary. Since students can drop out at any grade and also can reenter school or obtain an alternative credential at practically any age, there are various alternatives in the choice of a denominator. Thus, the report offers several choices of national dropout rates. The various measures reviewed in this section of the report will give the reader a range of information on which to make a judgment about the severity of the dropout problem in the United States. Figure 2 is a summary of the measures presented in this section of the report.

ANNUAL HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATE[1]

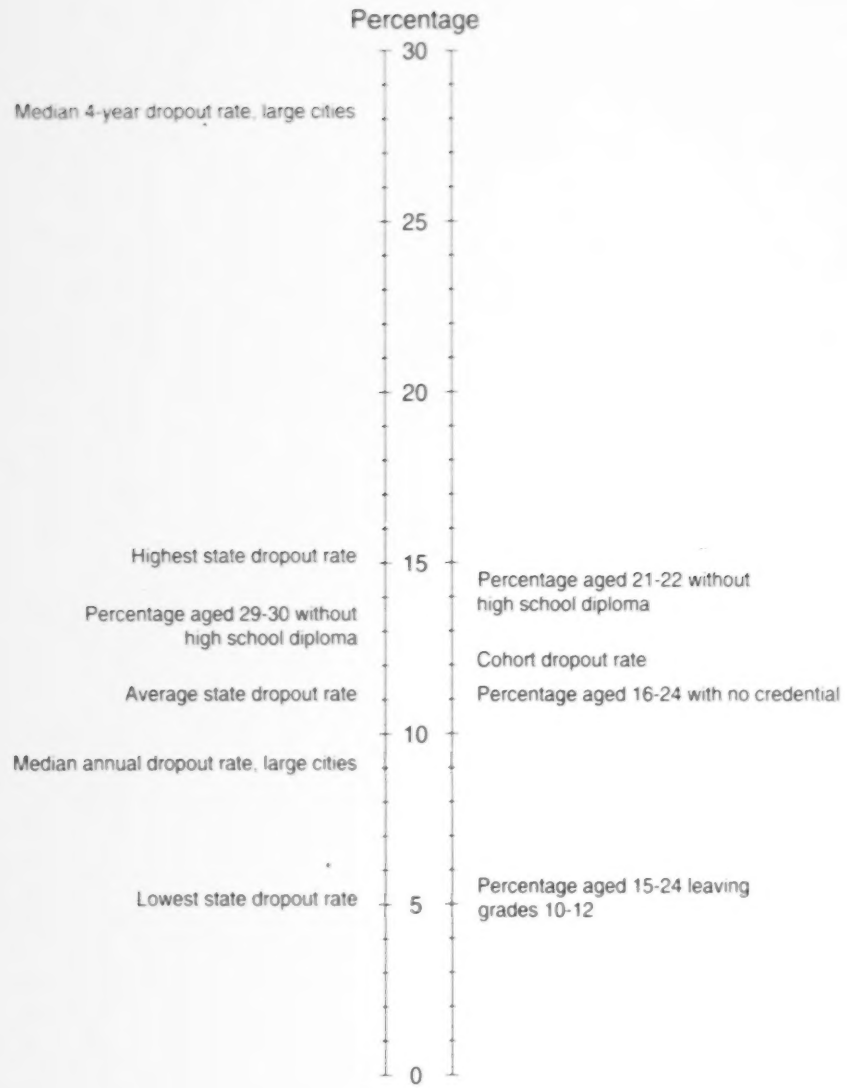
The annual dropout measure is termed the "event rate" by NCES and represents the percentage of students, ages 15 to 24 who leave grades 10 to 12 in a given year. In 1993, the rate was 4.5 percent, representing 881,000 students. This figure is up a half point from the lowest rates recorded in 1990 and 1991. Between the late 1970s (when the rate was almost 7 percent) and the early 1990s, the dropout rate declined by more than one-third.

Figure 3 shows the annual dropout rate trend lines for all students, and for Black, Hispanic, and White students. While the 1993 rate for White students was lower than the rate for Black and Hispanic students, and the Black rate was lower than the rate for Hispanic students, these differences are not statistically significant.

The good news from this measure is that the dropout rate has fallen over the last 10 to 15 years, from more than 6.5 percent in the late 1970s, to 4 percent in 1991. This decline applied to both White and Black students; the trend line for Hispanic

[1] The national dropout data presented in the next several sections of the report are drawn from Marilyn M. McMillen, Phillip Kaufman, and Summer D. Whitener, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1993*, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, September 1994.

Figure 2: Summary of Dropout Statistics Found in Report



Notes: See corresponding section of report for data sources and details.
Data listed are for the most recent year available.

students is inconsistent but higher than comparable rates for White and Black students. Similarly, the rates for both Black and White males and females fell. The rates for Hispanic males and females show no definite trend.

DROPOUT STATUS RATE

The "dropout status rate" is the percentage of people, ages 16 to 24, who do not have a high school credential. It is composed of dropouts from any grade, regardless of when they dropped out. Thus, this rate will tend to be higher than the "event" rate just discussed. In 1993 this rate was 11 percent, meaning that about 3.4 million persons ages 16 through 24 were high school dropouts. This is a decline of about four percentage points since 1972.

The "status" dropout rate for Black students was higher than the rate for White students, and the rate for Hispanic students was higher than the rate for Black students. In 1993, the rate for Whites was 7.9 percent, compared to 13.6 percent for Blacks and 27.5 percent for Hispanics. This large

Figure 3: The Annual Dropout Rate - Trends in the Percentage of 15 to 24-Year-Olds Leaving Grades 10 to 12 Each Year (Event Rate)

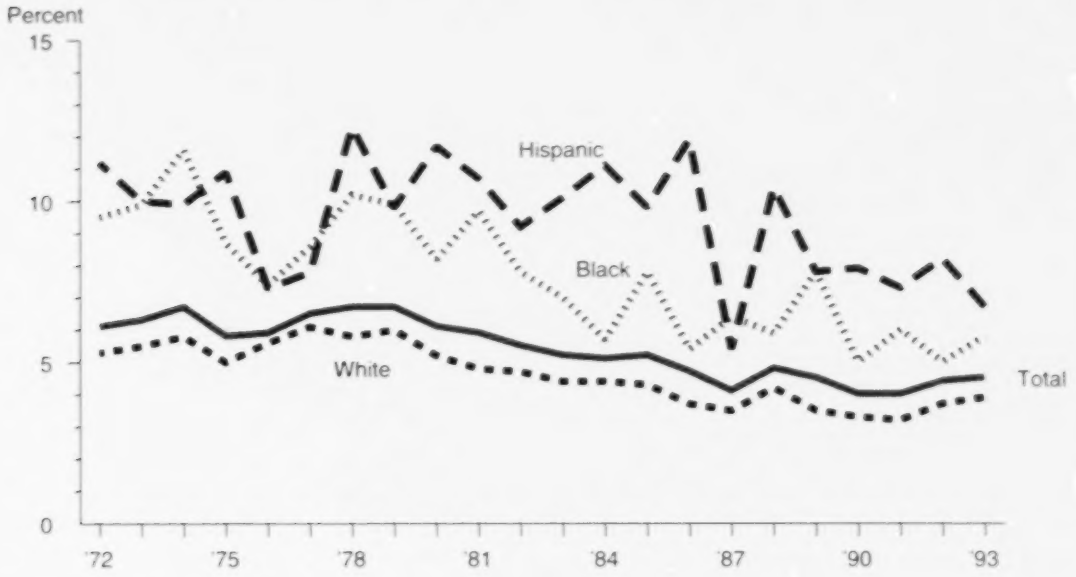
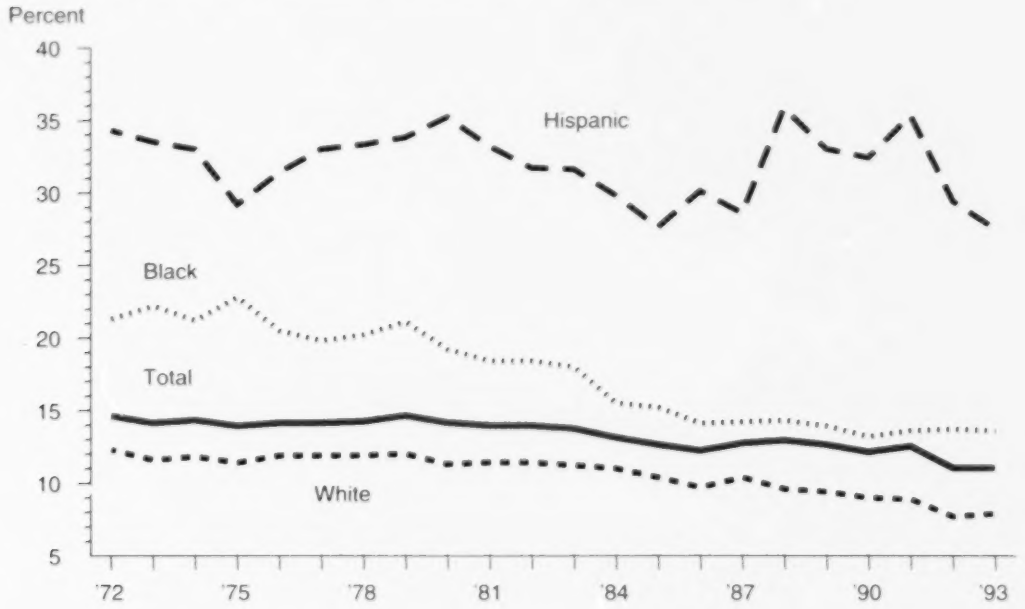


Figure 4: The Dropout Status Rate - Trends in the Percentage of 16 to 24-Year-Olds Without a High School Credential (Status Rate)



Source: McMillen, Marilyn M., Kaufman, Phillip, and Whitener, Summer. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1993*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, September 1994.

disparity between Hispanics and others may be due to language and immigration. For example, in 1989 nearly one-half of all Hispanics ages 16 through 24 years were born outside the United States, and their dropout status rate (43 percent) was more than three times the overall rate for that year.

The rate for Blacks declined markedly since the early 1970s, dropping about eight percentage points — from 22.2 percent in 1973 to 13.6 percent in 1993. This, combined with a slower drop for Whites, helped to narrow the gap between Blacks and Whites. In 1993, the rate for Whites was 7.9 percent, compared to 13.6 percent for Blacks. The rates for Hispanics appear to fluctuate from year to year, but are consistently higher than the rates for Blacks and Whites.

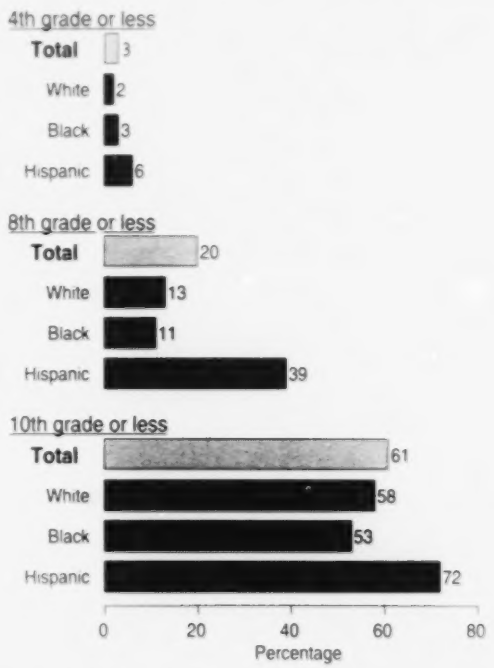
Data are also available on the educational attainment of these "status dropouts" and are shown for 1993 in Figure 5. Of all dropouts, about 3 percent dropped out at or before the fourth grade, 20 percent dropped out at or before the eighth grade, and 61 percent dropped out at or before the tenth grade. These data show that Hispanic students who dropped out left school earlier than other dropouts. Nearly 40 percent of Hispanic dropouts had an eighth grade education or less.

HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION RATES

Another way to view the dropout situation is to examine the proportion of a given population that have completed high school or attained a credential, such as a GED certificate, a certificate of completion, or a certificate of attendance. Here, we examine the rates for two age groups — 21- and 22-year-olds and 29- and 30-year-olds. While there are a few older people who are working to complete high school, these two groups provide a reasonable picture of high school completion rates and how these rates have changed over time.

Figure 6 shows the completion rates for 21- and 22-year-olds between 1972 and 1993. For the whole population, the rates gradually increased from about 82 percent in 1972 to about 86 percent in 1993. The 1993 completion rate for Whites (nearly 90 percent) is higher than the rate for Blacks (84 percent) and Hispanics (63 percent). While there has been considerable improvement for Blacks over the 22-year period, the movement in the trend line for Hispanics is not so pronounced.

Figure 5: Educational Attainment of Dropouts - Distribution of Status Dropouts, Ages 16-24, by Level of Education and Racial/Ethnic Group, October 1993



Source: McMillen, Marilyn M., Kaufman, Phillip, and Whitener, Summer. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1993*, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, September 1994.

Figure 6: Trends in the High School Completion Rate for 21- and 22-Year-Olds

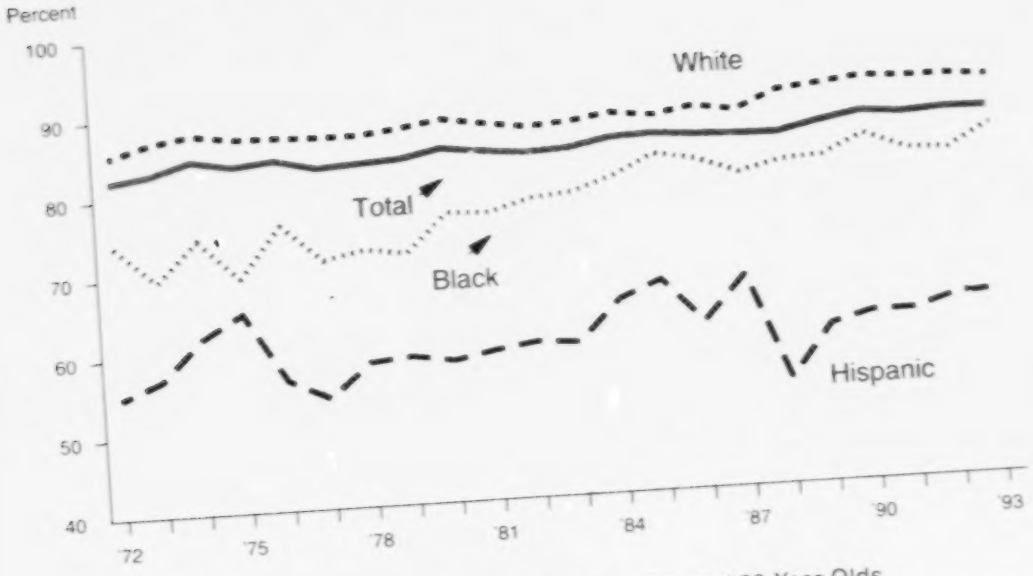
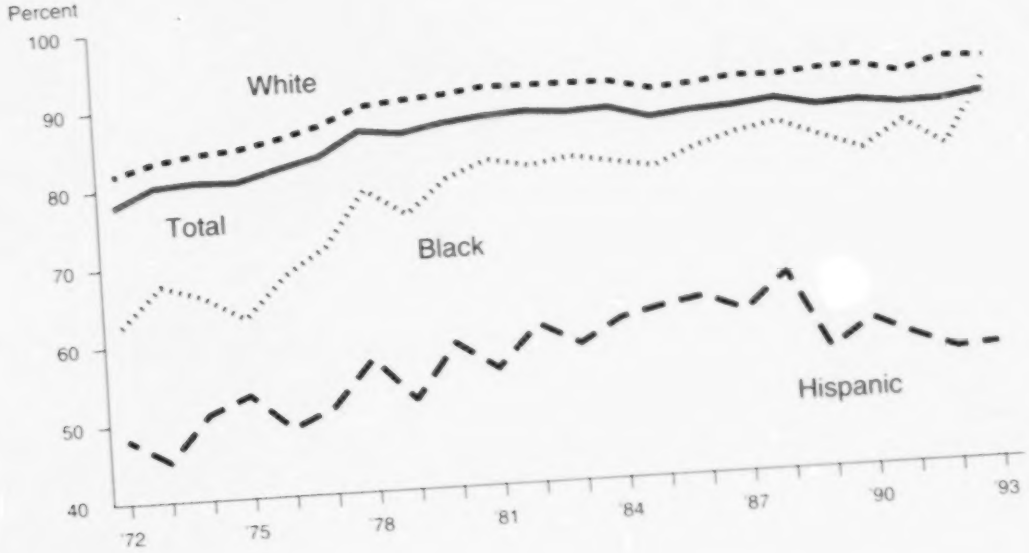


Figure 7: Trends in the High School Completion Rate for 29- and 30-Year-Olds



Source: McMillen, Marilyn M., Kaufman, Phillip, and Whitener, Summer. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1993*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, September 1994.

Completion rates for 29- and 30-year-olds are shown in Figure 7. This rate increased from about 78 percent in 1972 to nearly 87 percent in the early 1980s, and has remained relatively stable ever since. The rate for Blacks increased by about 10 percentage points over the two decades and was about four percentage points lower than the rate for Whites in 1993. The Hispanic completion rate was only about 55 percent in 1993, increasing from only about 45 percent 20 years earlier.

Table 1: Dropout Rates by Cohorts

Year	Age 16-18	Age 19-21	Age 22-24
1974	11.6	16.4	15.3
1977	11.4	16.3	15.2
1980	11.0	16.0	15.2
1983	9.4	15.6	15.7
1986	8.0	14.1	14.3
1989	8.8	15.2	13.7
1992	7.3	13.1	12.5

Source: McMillen, Marilyn M., Kaufman, Phillip, and Whitener, Summer D. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1993*, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, September 1994.

COHORT DROPOUT RATE

Another way to view the dropout problem is to follow the same group of people (cohort) over a period of time, taking measurements at various points along the way. This can be done using cross-sectional data from the Census, as seen in Table 1.

Note the arrows in the table that identify the cohorts. For example, in 1974 11.6 percent of 16-18-year-olds were dropouts. In 1977 these individuals were 19 to 21-year-olds, an age when most would have completed high school. The dropout rate for the group at this point increased to 16.3 percent. For the final year of measurement for this cohort, 1980, this group was 22 to 24 years old. The dropout rate by then had declined to 15.2 percent, probably because many had completed high school late or had attained an equivalency certificate. Each cohort is shown separately in Figure 8.

These time trends show an overall decrease in the dropout rate for each successive cohort of individuals. This trend is consistent with what has been seen over the other measures viewed previously.

STATE DROPOUT RATES[1]

While efforts are ongoing to develop comparable measures of the dropout problem among the states, we still have to rely on Census data for any consistent measurement. Thus, the most recent comparable data are for 1990 when the last census was taken. The measure is the percentage of individuals, ages 16 to 19, who are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school diploma or credential. The variation on this measure among the states can be seen in Figure 9. The U.S. average was 11 percent in 1990. North Dakota was at the top of the list with a dropout rate of only 5 percent; Nevada was at the bottom with a rate of 15 percent.

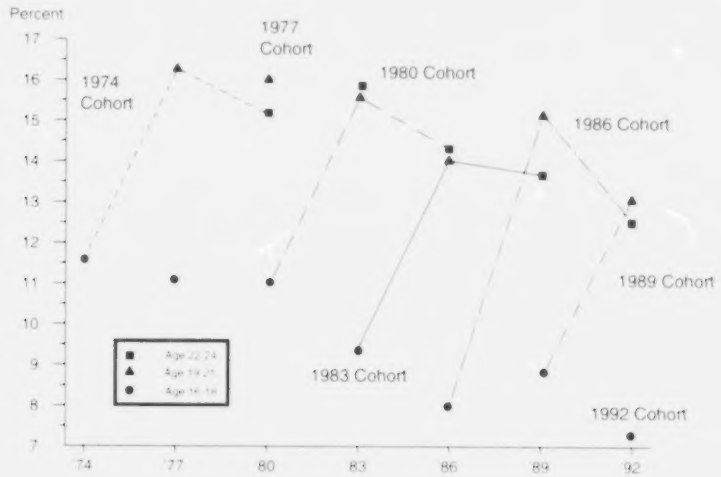
[1] State dropout data are from Bureau of the Census, Table ED-90-1, *Educational Attainment for Persons 25 Years and Over by State: 1990 Census*.

DROPOUT RATES IN LARGE CITIES[5]

The Council of the Great City Schools has made an effort to track progress toward the National Education Goals for the nation's large urban districts. In so doing, it has attempted to provide comparable data on the dropout rates in urban school districts. While these efforts are on-going, many problems remain in comparing dropout rates across urban school districts. The large variations seen across districts may be due more to differing definitions of dropouts and calculation rates than different levels of actual school leaving. The data provided below, therefore, provide a few summary dropout measures for central city schools, rather than listing individual data for the urban districts.

- In 1992-93, the median annual dropout rate was 9 percent. The median four-year dropout rate was 28 percent.
- In 1992-93, one out of four city districts had four-year dropout rates greater than 35 percent. Two years earlier, about one out of three had annual dropout rates that high.
- 90 percent of the city districts reported a decline in their four-year dropout rate between 1990-91 and 1992-93 and 55 percent reported a decline in their annual dropout rate.
- More than 70 percent of the urban districts reported an increase in their annual dropout rates among Black and Hispanic students.

Figure 8: Cohort Dropout Rates - Percentage of Individuals Ages 16 to 24 Without a High School Credential, by Cohort



Note: The 1974 cohort is composed of individuals who were between the ages of 16 and 18 in 1974, between 19 and 21 in 1977, and between 22 and 24 in 1980.
Source: McMillen, Marilyn M., Kaufman, Phillip, and Whitener, Summer D. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1993*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, September 1994.

THE GED PROGRAM[6]

The Tests of General Educational Development (GED) provide individuals who do not complete high school with an opportunity to earn a high school credential. By taking and passing a series of five tests in writing, social studies, science, interpreting literature

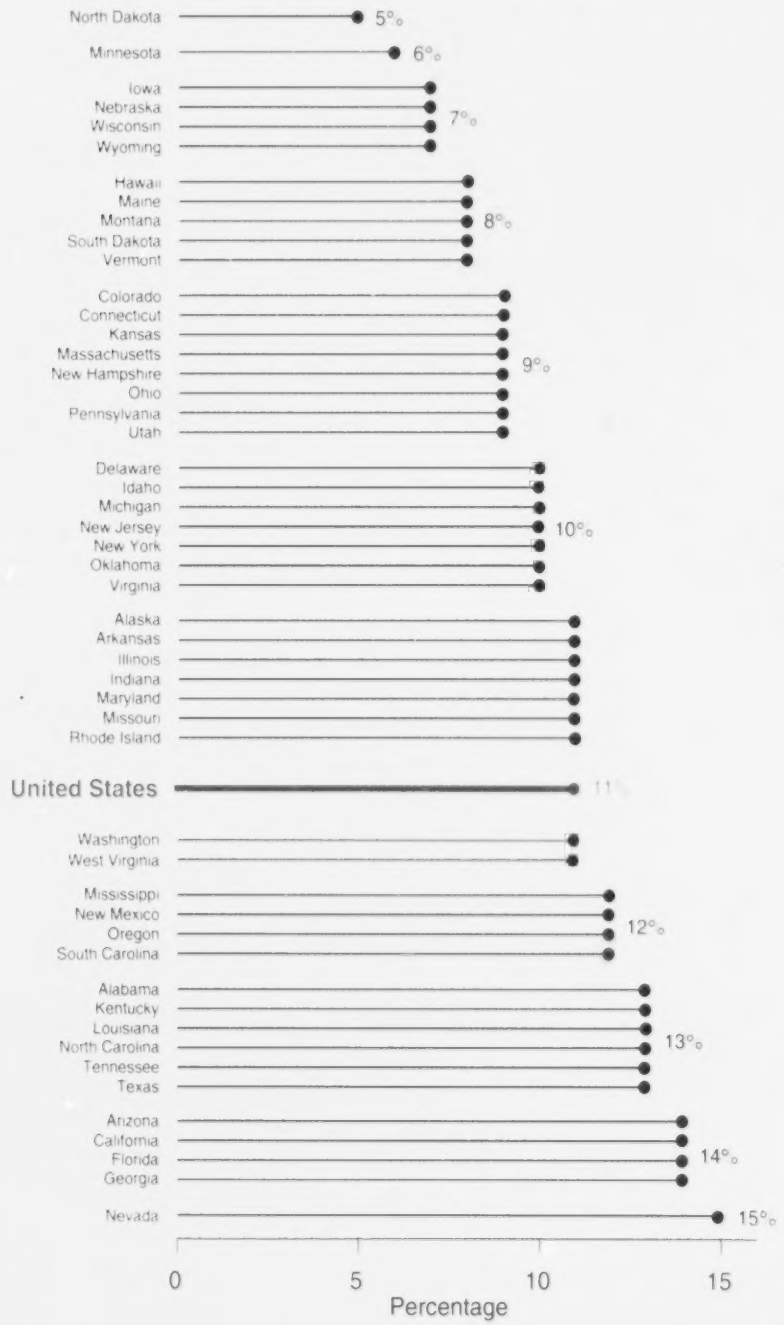
[5] Urban dropout data are from Council of the Great City Schools, *National Urban Education Goals: 1992-93 Indicators Report*, September 1994.

[6] GED data are from Baldwin, Janet, *Who Took the GED? GED 1993 Statistical Report*, American Council on Education, Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials, 1994.

and the arts, and mathematics, adults can demonstrate that they have acquired a level of learning comparable to that of high school graduates. Each year, more than 750,000 adults take the GED Tests and about 450,000 obtain high school credentials based on the tests. About one in seven high school diplomas issued in the United States each year is based on the GED Tests. While the dropout rates discussed above consider GED holders as high school graduates, a description of who takes the GED is helpful in completing the picture of high school completion. Some highlights for 1993:

- The highest grade GED candidates completed before leaving school was, on average, 10th grade.
- The average age of GED candidates in the U.S. and its territories was 26.
- More than 450,000 GED candidates planned further study beyond the high school level, representing 60 percent of all candidates tested.

Figure 9: State Dropout Rates - Percentage Ages 16 to 19 Not Enrolled in School and without a High School Diploma, 1990



Source: Bureau of Census, *Educational Attainment of Persons 25 Years and Over, by State: 1990 Census*, Table ED-90-1.

DROPOUTS FROM THE CLASS OF 1992

INTRODUCTION

The National Education Longitudinal Study of the eighth grade cohort of 1988 (NELS:88), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, is a major longitudinal effort to provide trend data about critical transitions experienced by students as they leave elementary school and progress through high school and into postsecondary institutions or the work force.

Follow-up data on eighth-grade base-year students were collected in the Spring of 1990 (when the students were in tenth grade) and in the Spring of 1992 (when the students were in their final semester of high school). Each follow-up also surveyed the population of dropouts, allowing researchers to track students who dropped out of school after the eighth grade.

These efforts complement a range of research and studies designed to find out why students drop out of school. The National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth Labor Market Experience conducted from 1979 to 1981 and national studies like *High School and Beyond* have provided much information on dropouts. Studies of these data have found that dropping out is related to students' background, achievement, behavior, and attitudes. In *Who Drops Out of High School and Why? Findings from a National Study*, the authors provide the following summary:

> *First, the critical variables related to dropping out are school performance, as measured by grades, and extent of problem behavior. These variables are more important in explaining dropout behavior than sophomore ability, as measured by test scores.*
>
> *Second, problem behavior and grades appear to be determined in part by the home educational support system. The mother's educational aspirations for the student, the number of study aids in the home, parental involvement in curriculum choice, and the provision of opportunities for out-of-school learning all affect school academic performance and misbehavior.*
>
> *Third, variables of ethnicity, gender, curriculum choice, entry to preschool, age, previous retention, and time spent on homework do not directly cause dropping out, but they affect students' academic performance. Similar effects are found for students in general and then the racial/ethnic, curriculum, gender, and minorities showed the greatest improvement with respect to dropout rates if they dropped out of school. These environmental determinants for dropping out and minorities were largest in the language development areas of vocabulary, reading, and grammar.*

Who are the dropouts from the Class of 1992? What are their backgrounds? What caused them to drop out? What were their school experiences? What are their plans for the future? What are their attitudes and

Ekstrom, Ruth B., Goertz, Margaret E., Pollack, Judith M., and Rock, Donald A., "Who Drops Out of School and Why: Findings from a National Study," in Gary Natriello (ed.), *School Dropouts: Patterns and Policies*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1987.

feelings? This section of the report discusses these issues and, when the data are available (when the same questions were asked of both groups of youth), compares dropouts with the students who persisted in school and became the graduating class of 1992. All differences between dropouts and graduates and between males and females that are discussed in the text are statistically significant.[1]

BACKGROUND

Almost 9 percent of students who began the eighth grade in 1988 dropped out of school. Like most dropout statistics, this rate is subject to several caveats. First, some students may have dropped out before the eighth grade, when NELS:88 data collection began. Second, as will be seen later in this section, some percentage of these "dropouts" returned to school and/or obtained a GED certificate. The data for dropouts that are reported in this section of the report are for students who dropped out of school at some point and filled out a "dropout" questionnaire. However, some of these "dropouts" returned to education.

Table 2 shows the racial/ethnic distribution among dropouts and the original NELS:88 cohort. One way to determine if there were differences among the groups in the likelihood of dropping out is to compare the racial/ethnic distribution of dropouts with the composition of members of their cohorts who graduated from high school. In doing so, it appears that Hispanics and Blacks were somewhat more likely than other groups to drop out of school, but the differences were not large. While Hispanics and Blacks made up 11 and 14 percent, respectively, of the Class of 1992, they represented 16 and 18 percent, respectively, of the dropouts. On the other hand, Asians represented about 4 percent of the Class of 1992 and less than 2 percent of the dropouts.

Table 2: Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Dropouts and NELS:88 Cohort

	Percentage of Dropouts	Percentage of Cohort
White	60%	68%
Black	18	14
Hispanic[2]	16	11
American Indian/Alaskan	3	4
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	4

Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

Boys and girls dropped out of the Class of 1992 in about equal proportions, and within each racial/ethnic group, there were very small differences between boys and girls.

MARITAL STATUS AND PARENTHOOD

About one-fifth of dropouts were married, divorced, or living in a marriage-like relationship. Seventy-eight percent of the dropouts were single and never married, 12 percent were married, 3 percent were divorced or separated, and 6 percent were in a marriage-like relationship. Females were more likely than males to be married.

Almost 40 percent of dropouts either had a child or were expecting one — the figure for females was 54 percent, with 46 percent having a child and 8 percent expecting. Figure 10 shows the relationship of the dropouts with the other parent of their youngest child.

[1] Data in this section of the report are from: Ingels, Steven J. and others. *Second Follow-Up: Student Component Data File User's Manual, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988* and *Second Follow-Up: Dropout Component Data File User's Manual, National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, October 1994. Additional analyses of the NELS:88 data were provided by the National Data Resource Center.

[2] Among dropouts classified as Hispanic, 74 percent were Mexican, 12 percent were Puerto Rican, 12 percent were classified as "other Hispanic," and slightly more than 1 percent were Cuban.

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SCHOOL AND HOME STABILITY

Dropouts were more likely than the graduates to have changed schools and to have moved since 1988. Twenty-four percent of the dropouts changed schools two or more times since 1988, compared to only 9 percent of graduates. The difference in moving is even more striking. Fifty-four percent of dropouts moved since 1988, compared to only 15 percent of graduates. Dropouts were also more likely to have run away from home in the last two years. Twelve percent of dropouts did so, compared to 6 percent of graduates.

Figure 10: Dropouts with Children - Relationship with Parent of Youngest Child

Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

THE CONTEXT FOR DROPPING OUT

This section identifies the reasons that students cited for their decision to drop out of school, describes their satisfaction with that decision, and indicates the last grade attended in school. Students drop out of school for a variety of reasons, many of which are complex and cumulative. Dale Mann provides the following perspective:

> *Most students quit because of the compounded impact of, for example, being poor, growing up in a broken home, having been held back in the fourth grade, and finally having slugged "Mr Fairlee," the school's legendary vice-principal for enforcement.*[1]

In the NELS:88 questionnaire, dropouts were prompted with a variety of reasons for dropping out and asked to indicate whether the reason(s) pertained to them. Figure 11 shows a summary from these data.

Four of the top six reasons had to do with school problems. Many dropouts didn't like school, were getting poor grades, couldn't keep up with their school work, and

[1] Dale Mann, "Can We Help Dropouts," in *School Dropouts: Patterns and Policies*, Gary Natriello, ed. New York: Teachers College Press, 1987.

couldn't get along with their teachers. Working also seems to play a significant role. Twenty-seven percent said they dropped out because they got a job, and 20 percent said that they couldn't work and go to school at the same time. For many of these young people, working appears to be necessary. Many reported that they quit school to support or care for their families.

The reasons given for dropping out are somewhat different for males and females, as seen in Figure 12. Males were more likely to drop out because of school problems, including being suspended and expelled, and for reasons having to do with work. Females were more likely to quit school to have a baby or get married. It is particularly striking that nearly one-third of the females quit school because they got pregnant.

Other data collected from the dropouts help to understand the context for dropping out of school. We have information on dropouts' satisfaction with their decision to drop out, on the grade last attended and whether the students were passing in their school work, and on the type of high school program they pursued.

Figure 11: Reasons for Dropping Out

Didn't like school 44
Was getting poor grades 39
Had other problem 31
Couldn't keep up with school work 30
Got a job 27
Couldn't get along with teachers 26
Felt I didn't belong 24
Couldn't work and go to school at same time 20
Became a parent 17
Had to support my family 15
Was pregnant 15*
Couldn't get along with other students 15
Was suspended 14
Had to care for family 13
Got married or planned to 12
Changed schools and didn't like new one 11
Was expelled 10
Friends dropped out 9
Wanted to have a family 9
Didn't feel safe at school 8
Wanted to travel 7
Had drug/alcohol problem 5
0 10 20 30 40 50
Percentage

*30 percent of females

Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

Twenty-eight percent of the dropouts said that dropping out of school was a good decision for them. Ten percent didn't know. Dropouts also did very poorly in their final year of school. Only 18 percent said that they passed their last year of school. Table 3 shows the last grade these students attended. Half of them were out of school before the eleventh grade, and 19 percent left school before the tenth grade.

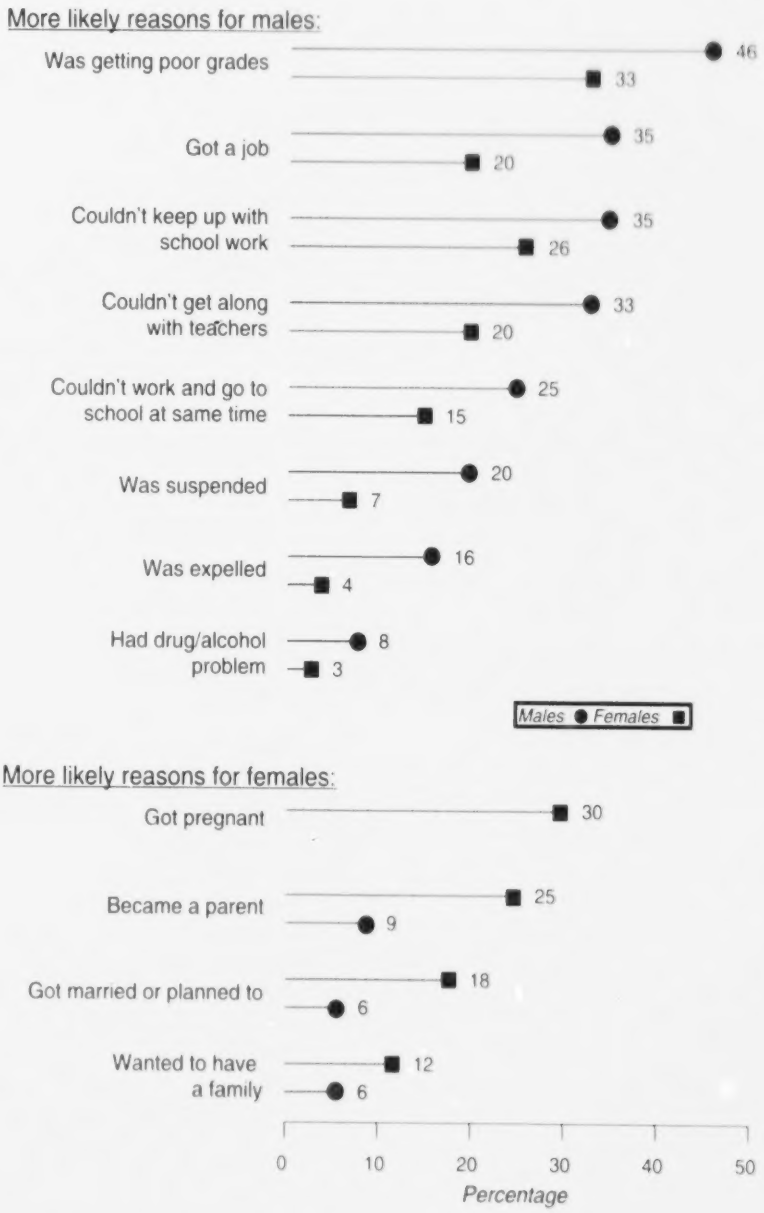
HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAM

Table 4 shows the type of high school program that the dropouts and their classmates participated in. As can be seen, the vast majority of dropouts were enrolled in a general high school program. Very few were in a college preparatory program. Dropouts were more likely than their classmates to have been enrolled in special education (3 percent) and alternative programs (5 percent).

INTERVENTIONS ATTEMPTED

Information is also available about the interventions that were attempted — both by school personnel and by parents/guardians — when dropouts stopped

Figure 12: Reasons for Dropping Out, Males and Females



Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

Table 3: Dropouts' Last Grade Attended

8th	3%
9th	16
10th	30
11th	33
12th	16
No grade system	2

Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

Table 4: High School Program, Dropouts and Graduates

	Dropouts	Graduates
General	63%	38%
College Prep	5	41
Other	32	21

Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

going to school for the last time. These results are shown in Figure 13.

As can be seen in the Figure, the most frequently attempted intervention by school staff was to try to talk students into staying in school. This was reported by 39 percent of the dropouts. However, what this means is that 60 percent of the dropouts answered "no" to the question of whether school staff tried to talk them into staying in school. Since the question was worded, ". . . the last time you stopped going to school . . .," it is possible that previous attempts had been made. In any case, the percentages of dropouts who reported interventions of any type were quite small. It is noteworthy that many of the dropouts reported that they were told they couldn't come back to school (17 percent) and that they were expelled or suspended (16 percent).

Males were more likely than females to report that:

- Staff offered to send them to another school (16 vs. 9 percent).
- They were told that they could come back if they followed discipline rules (19 vs. 9 percent).
- They were told they couldn't come back.
- They were expelled or suspended.

Parents and guardians appear to be more supportive, at least in some respects. Two-thirds or more of the dropouts indicated that a parent or guardian expressed dissatisfaction with the dropouts' decision to leave school, and from a third to a half offered to help the dropouts in some way or another. More than 20 percent of the parents guardians contacted the school, phoning either a principal, a teacher, or a counselor. Parents guardians of male dropouts were more likely than parents guardians of females dropouts to contact school staff (28 percent vs. 18 percent).

CURRENT ACTIVITIES AND PLANS

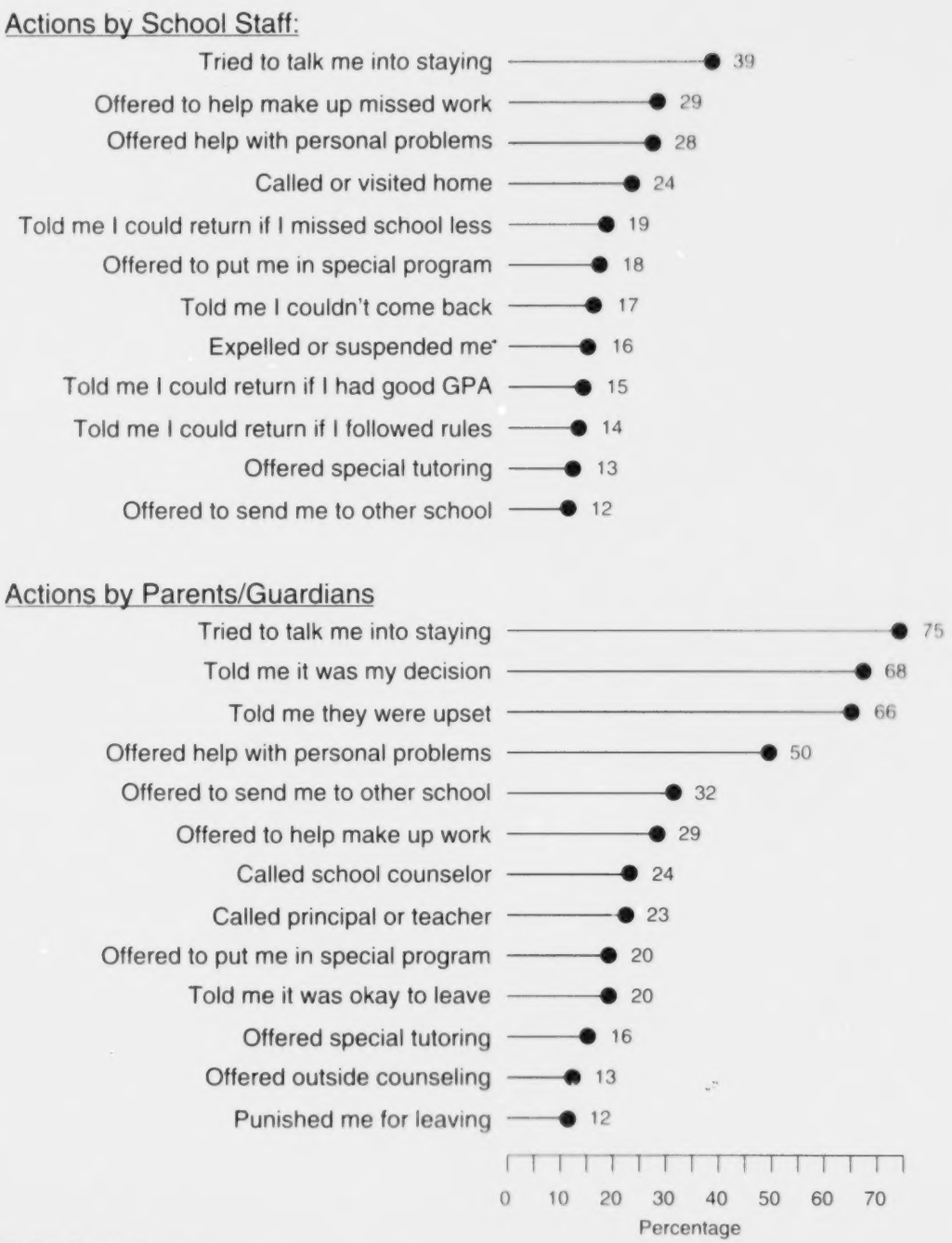
Dropouts were asked several questions requiring them to recall recent experiences and to think about the likelihood that they will continue their education. Table 5 lists dropouts' responses to the question, "In the past two years, did any of the following things happen to you?"

Many of the dropouts had problems in school, with almost half having failed a course and more than one-fifth being held back a grade in school. About a third looked into furthering their education. Few students have participated in the other activities. Males were more likely than females to have been in drug rehabilitation, to have been held back in school, and to have failed a course.

Twenty-four percent of the dropouts reported that they had participated in an alternative program. Figure 14 shows the types of services provided in these programs.

Forty-one percent of the dropouts had enrolled in a GED program since leaving high school and 14 percent had enrolled in a technical, vocational, or trade school. Four percent had enrolled in a community college or two-year vocational trade program and 3 percent

Figure 13: Actions by School Staff and Parents/Guardians Prior to Dropping Out of School


Actions by School Staff:
Tried to talk me into staying 39
Offered to help make up missed work 29
Offered help with personal problems 28
Called or visited home 24
Told me I could return if I missed school less 19
Offered to put me in special program 18
Told me I couldn't come back 17
Expelled or suspended me 16
Told me I could return if I had good GPA 15
Told me I could return if I followed rules 14
Offered special tutoring 13
Offered to send me to other school 12
Actions by Parents/Guardians
Tried to talk me into staying 75
Told me it was my decision 68
Told me they were upset 66
Offered help with personal problems 50
Offered to send me to other school 32
Offered to help make up work 29
Called school counselor 24
Called principal or teacher 23
Offered to put me in special program 20
Told me it was okay to leave 20
Offered special tutoring 16
Offered outside counseling 13
Punished me for leaving 12
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70
Percentage

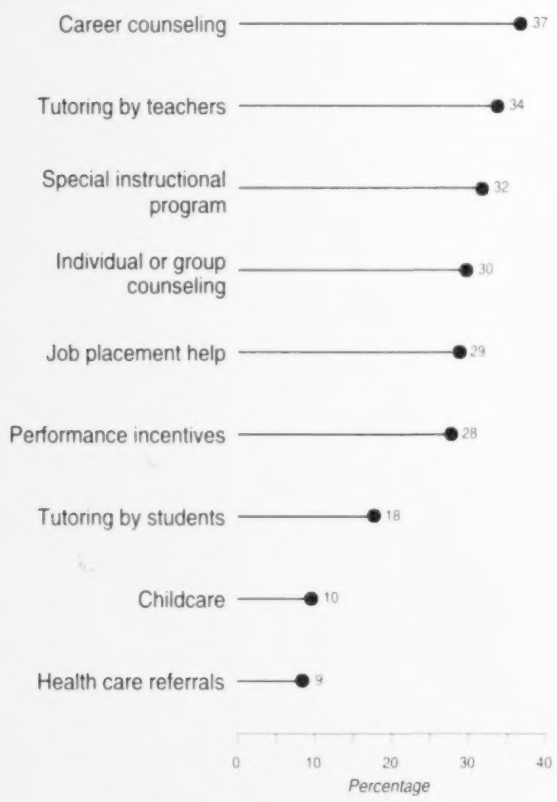
Source: NELS 88 Second Follow-up

Table 5: Dropouts' Recent Experiences

Failed a course in school	45%
Looked into alternative school GED	35
Saw counselor social worker	24
Was held back a grade in school	23
Went to family counseling	9
Did work for my religious group	6
Went to youth center outreach program	6
Was in alcohol rehabilitation	5
Failed a competency test for graduation	5
Was in drug rehabilitation	4

Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

Figure 14: Services Received in Alternative Programs



Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

had enrolled in an academic program in a community college or a four-year college or university.

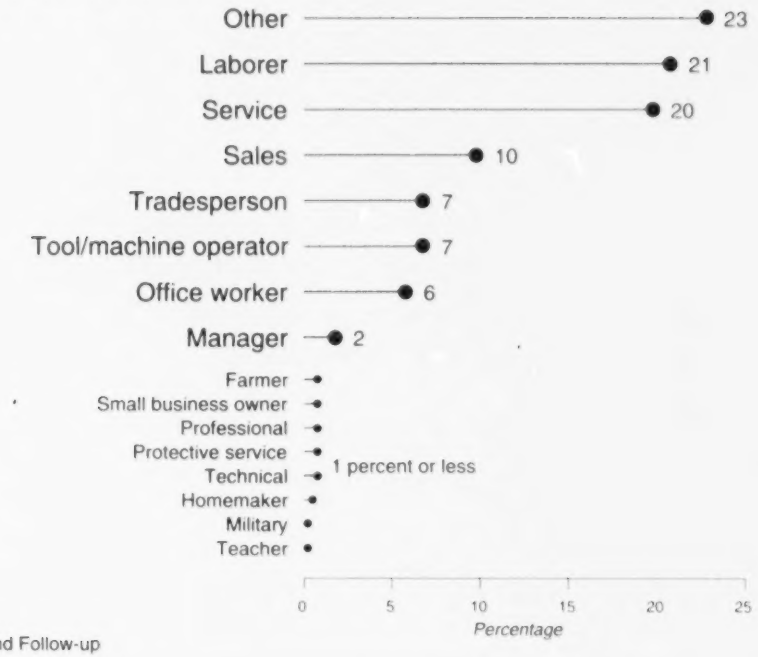
Eight percent of the dropouts reported they had earned a GED certificate, a high school diploma, or equivalent. Another 82 percent reported that they planned to get a GED. Females were more likely than males to report they planned to get a GED. Twenty percent of the dropouts indicated they were currently taking GED preparation classes, and 79 percent said they planned to enroll in a class to prepare for the GED or other tests. Finally, 30 percent said they planned to go back to school to get a high school diploma. Subsequent follow-ups will determine the extent to which these plans were followed and expectations met.

Dropouts were also asked to indicate the type of job they currently had (or have had most recently) and to identify the job they will have when they reach the age of 30. These data are shown in Figures 15 and 16. An obvious problem with identifying the types of jobs that dropouts held when the survey was conducted is that the most frequently cited category was "other." That problem aside, most of the other respondents were working in lower level jobs like laborer and service occupations. This should come as no surprise. More surprising are dropouts' expectations for future employment. As shown in Figure 18, the most frequently cited job category is "Professional I." This category consists of accountant, registered nurse, banker, librarian, writer, actor, social worker, etc. The rest of the responses are spread over a wide range of job categories.

VIEWS ABOUT THE FUTURE

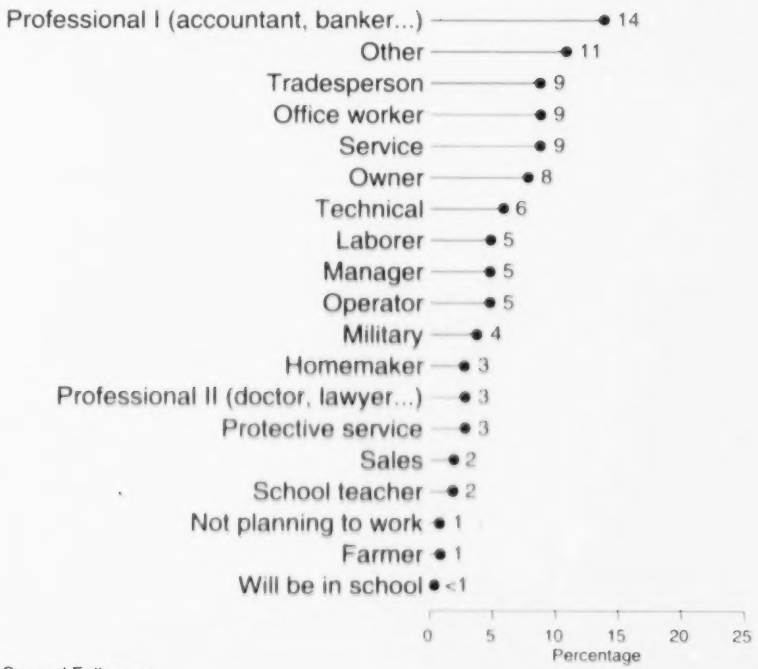
To find out about how dropouts view their futures, respondents were given a number of prompts introduced as follows: "Think about how you see your future. What are the chances that . . ." Figure 17 shows the percentage of dropouts who responded that the chances of that particular event happening were either high or very high. Dropouts were fairly optimistic for their children, their personal relationships, their health, and their

Figure 15: Dropouts' Current or Most Recent Job



Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

Figure 16: Dropouts' Expected Jobs at Age 30



Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

Figure 17: Percentage of Dropouts Saying That Chances Are High or Very High That They Will Have Various Experiences

Source: NELS 88 Second Follow-up

jobs. They were less optimistic about their chances for further educational attainment. About half thought that chances were high that they would have a better life than their parents.

SCHOOL BEHAVIORS

Both dropouts and graduates were asked the extent to which they had engaged in certain negative behaviors in school or had experienced various penalties for their behavior in the most recent semester they were in school. The results, shown in Figure 18, indicate that the dropouts experienced much difficulty in school in the semester before they dropped out, both in absolute terms and in comparison with the students who persisted in school. Keep in mind that these behaviors or penalties occurred within one semester of school.

Almost half the dropouts missed 10 days or more of school, and about a third cut class 10 times or more. Approximately a third were put on in-school suspension, suspended, or put on probation. Dropouts exhibited these behaviors three times more often than graduates. Eleven percent of the dropouts

had been arrested during the semester, and 8 percent spent time in a juvenile home or shelter. Males were more likely than females to experience these behavioral difficulties.

LOCUS OF CONTROL AND SELF-CONCEPT

Survey data provide information on both locus of control and self-concept. Locus of control has to do with the amount of control people think they have over their lives and has been shown to relate to educational achievement. Individuals with external locus of control tend to rely on outside forces in their lives and feel that they have little control over what happens to them. Students with internal locus of control tend to believe they have control over their lives.

Figure 19 shows these data. Many of the dropouts responded to the locus of control items in ways that indicate an external locus, i.e., they felt that don't have control over their lives, that chance and luck are important, or that something always seems to stop them when they try to get ahead. In addition, they were generally more likely to express an external locus than were

Figure 18: Frequency of School Behavior Problems During the Last Semester, Dropouts and Graduates

Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

Figure 19: Measures of Locus of Control and Self-Concept: Dropouts and Graduates

Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

the graduates. On the self-concept measures, there is less of a difference. Generally, most dropouts felt good about themselves, although 44 percent indicated that they felt useless at times (compared to 33 percent of graduates), a third thought that they were no good at all at times, and about a fifth felt that they don't have much to be proud of.

EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Only 15 percent of the dropouts indicated that they expected to attain less than a high school education when asked how far they thought they'd get in school. These data are displayed in Figure 20. Many of the dropouts expected to complete additional education. About a fifth planned to attend vocational, trade, or business school, and almost a third expected to attend college, with 11 percent expecting to attain a degree. Five percent expected to obtain a master's degree. As would be expected, dropouts' educational expectations were much more modest than those of their peers who graduate from high school.

CONCLUSION

The plight of the high school dropout is not a new concern to education policymakers in this country. The concern has been greatest in the nation's inner cities where educational inequalities and high dropout rates led James Conant to call the situation "social dynamite" in his 1961 book, *Slums and Suburbs*. Programs to stop students from dropping out of school and to re-educate those who do are probably among the most ubiquitous in education. Yet the problem continues. Too many students still drop out of school, and many of those who eventually get a high school credential do so outside of traditional high schools (although this is certainly a lot better than the alternative). Each year almost half a million people obtain a high school credential through the GED program.

Figure 20: Dropouts' Educational Expectations

Source: NELS:88 Second Follow-up

While the line graphs for most measures of dropping out of high school have been slanting downwards over the last two decades, we have seen little progress in recent years. The nation has considerable work ahead to meet Goal 2 of our National Education Goals, that by the year 2000 the high school graduation rate will be at least 90 percent. High dropout rates from our large urban high schools continue to be particularly disturbing. Our country can no longer afford to waste the potential contribution of these individuals to society, nor can it afford to pay for the dependencies that are strongly associated with dropping out of school.

The reasons for dropping out of school appear to be complex and cumulative. A variety of school problems and connections between school and work were cited, and pregnancy was a major factor in girls' decisions to drop out of school. And few of these girls were married to or living with the other parent of their child. Dropouts encountered many difficulties in school, tending to change schools more frequently than other students, and to run

away from home. A significant proportion of dropouts clashed with school authorities while still enrolled and reported that they were expelled from school, rather than voluntarily separated.

Most of the dropouts who have found employment are working in the labor and service areas. At this early stage of their lives they appear to be upbeat in their outlooks, however. Most plan to obtain a GED or high school diploma, and many plan to go on to college. They are fairly optimistic about the futures of their children, their personal relationships, their health, and their future jobs. While they tend to express an external locus of control, most have positive self-concept.

Only time will tell the rest of the story. The statistics on their predecessors, however, give little basis for optimism for large numbers of them. Dropouts have become damaged at a critical point in their lives, separated from an environment that was probably their best hope for a productive and rewarding life. As Langston Hughes has asked: What will happen to their dreams deferred? Will they dry up like raisins in the sun? Or will they explode?

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